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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003631

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SUBJECT: SHIA FADHILAH PARTY SUPPORTIVE OF SOFA, SEEKS
BETTER TIES WITH U.S.

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Continuing his intensive diplomatic outreach to gather support for the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the Ambassador updated the Fadhilah party's Secretary-General, Hashim al-Hashimi; Council of Representatives (CoR) bloc leader Hassan al-Shimmari; and CoR member Karim Yacoubi, on the current status of the agreement. Noting that the U.S. had accepted approximately 80% of the amendments presented by the Council of Ministers (CoM), the Ambassador said that he expected the agreement to be passed to the CoM in the ensuing days, and if passed, to the CoR for ratification. Though the Fadhilah leaders indicated that they support the agreement in principle, they said that they have yet to reach a final decision. They agreed that time is quickly ticking on the agreement and that a decision must be made soon. Stressing the importance of a secret ballot, the Fadhilah leaders said this would provide cover to those who privately support the agreement but fear publicly voting in favor. End Summary.

Congratulations for Obama

12. (C) In a November 13 meeting at the Fadhilah bloc offices in the CoR, Fadhilah Secretary-General Hashim al-Hashimi, CoR bloc leader Hassan al-Shimmari, and CoR member Karim Yacoubi lauded President-elect Obama's recent victory, with al-Hashimi stating that "the world was happy." Continuing, al-Hashimi noted the historic nature of Obama's victory and said that his victory will lead to a period of better relations between the U.S. and the world. Referring to the ongoing economic crisis in the U.S., al-Hashimi acknowledged that much of Obama's attention would be focused on internal matters, but added that he does not expect U.S. policy toward Iraq to significantly change.

SOFA: Atmosphere Positive...

13. (C) Ambassador Crocker informed the assembled leaders that the U.S. had responded to the recent SOFA amendments that were presented by the CoM. Stating that the U.S. had responded positively to approximately 80% of the CoM demands, the Ambassador relayed that the PM indicated that he would present the amended text to the CoM in the next few days. If the CoM approves the text, the agreement would then be sent to the CoR for ratification. Commenting on the ongoing SOFA debate, the Ambassador noted that the atmosphere is "becoming more positive than negative." Continuing, the Ambassador observed that the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) had become much more supportive of the agreement, but cautioned that though some among the Sunni community were supportive, there was still some hesitancy from others.

14. (C) Al-Shimmari questioned whether the PM would reach out to the various political blocs when forming the SOFA implementation committees. The Ambassador responded that this has been the subject of discussions with the PM, stating that the PM has committed to consult with all blocs before forming the committees and realizes that these committees must be professional, not political. Al-Shimmari responded

that the appointment of professionals would be very important and would go a long way towards resolving the continuing fears that many have about the PM's intentions.

¶15. (C) Addressing Fadhilah's lingering fears that the PM and his Dawa party would use the agreement to consolidate power, the Ambassador stressed that the agreement is not just with one party, but with all of Iraq. The Ambassador noted that the results of next year's provincial and national elections will lead to a new government, and that the agreement will be valid for two additional years after that. Pointing to the agreement itself, the Ambassador noted that it will give Iraq three years of security, which will allow the political process to develop and evolve in a secure environment.

But Time is of the Essence

¶16. (C) The Ambassador also reminded the Fadhilah leadership that the current UNSCR would expire on December 31, leaving only 6 weeks to conclude an agreement. Acknowledging the Ambassador's point, al-Shimmari added that the CoR will recess on November 25 for the Eid holiday and would not return until December 14. Interjecting, al-Hashimi said that there was national consensus on the agreement, and that the time had come to "finish this matter." Al-Hashimi told the Ambassador that though his party was supportive of the agreement in principle, it was still consulting with other blocs and hoped to reach a decision soon. The leaders also questioned whether the Iraqi Islamic Party,s (IIP) recent call for a referendum was feasible, to which the Ambassador replied that it would be impossible to conduct a referendum before the expiration of the current UNSCR. He added that

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the IIP's desire to hold the referendum with the provincial elections was also not a viable option. Doing so would require a renewal of the UNSCR, which the Ambassador dismissed as unrealistic.

Secret Ballot Necessary

¶17. (C) Asked by the Ambassador whether Fadhilah would prefer a secret or open ballot, Yacoubi quickly responded that with a secret ballot, "we can get rid of the pressure." Elaborating, Yacoubi said that a secret ballot will provide individual CoR members the opportunity to vote their conscience without the fear of repercussions from their bloc leaders. Al-Shimmari also expressed his preference for a secret ballot, stating that "it will lead to passage of the agreement." Al-Shimmari said that though there is still opposition to the agreement and the continued presence of the U.S. in Iraq, even among politicians who have publicly supported the agreement, most Iraqi politicians realize that it is "a good agreement." Al-Shimmari added that though the Kurds publicly support the agreement, other groups such as the UIA, who he acknowledged privately support the agreement, Iraqiyyah, and Fadhilah need the cover that a secret ballot will provide. Yacoubi stressed that CoR Speaker Mashadani would need to be pressured to do this, but al-Shimmari opined that arrangements could be made to accomplish this.

Better U.S.-Fadhilah Relations Important for Both Parties

¶18. (C) Turning the conversation away from the SOFA, al-Hashimi remarked that in the past, the U.S. had adapted a policy of non-engagement with Fadhilah and had even sought to remove Fadhilah from the political scene. Al-Hashimi declared that Fadhilah enjoyed widespread support among the Iraqi public and reminded the Ambassador that the members and followers of Fadhilah had endured the bleakest period of Iraqi history, unlike many of the exiles who returned to Iraq after the 2003 invasion. Al-Hashimi cautioned that excluding Fadhilah from the political process did not serve U.S. interests. Continuing, al-Hashimi said Fadhilah wished to establish dialogue with the U.S., believing that this will be beneficial to both parties.

19. (C) Stressing that the U.S. had never sought to exclude Fadhilah, Ambassador Crocker reminded al-Hashimi that during their previous meeting on October 16, he had expressed his respect for Fadhilah and its deep roots with Muhammed Sadiq al-Sadr. In addition to his recent meetings with the Fadhilah leadership, the Ambassador pointed out the recent meeting in Basrah that he and Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte had with Governor Wa'ili. Ambassador Crocker also told the Fadhilah leaders that he would welcome the opportunity to meet with the party's spiritual founder, Sheikh Muhammed Yacoubi, and though the leaders demurred on the offer, they did tell the Ambassador that he could deliver messages to Yacoubi through them. Clarifying Hashimi's earlier statement, Shimmari stated that he believed that a U.S. policy of non-engagement existed prior to 2006, and may have been driven by some of Fadhilah's opponents who wanted to drive a wedge between the U.S. and Fadhilah. Ambassador Crocker reiterated that this was never the case. Al-Shimmari concluded by praising U.S. support for the democratic process in Iraq and for its efforts in creating a more stable Iraq.

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